

Drilling, controversy since 1969 **Environmental movement 40 years old**

[Ventura County Star](#): Platform B off the Santa Barbara coast hasn't changed much since its 12 legs were sunk into the ocean floor 41 years ago. Though it's showing its age, the bright blue network of pipes and pumps still sucks oil and gas around the clock from the ocean floor, transporting the resources via pipeline to land, where it's sold to power-hungry Southern California. It's there, on land, where everything has changed over the past four decades.

Forty years ago, the platform next to B spewed millions of gallons of oil into the sea, launching the modern environmental movement and a host of state and national environmental laws.

Lawmakers issued a moratorium to stop any more platforms from being built off California. Local politicians took a stand to stop more drilling.

But over time, attitudes toward drilling changed with the ebb and flow of oil prices. The moratorium once thought to be permanent is now in limbo.

While Platform B and the 22 others that dot the Central Coast continue to extract oil from the ocean, the political battle over drilling remains, with opponents often citing the past as a warning.

Last week, as environmentalists engaged in a failed horse trade to get some of the platforms removed while allowing one remaining platform to tap into new reserves, the spill was repeatedly invoked as reason for the deal.

The reality, both sides agree, is the platforms that rise from the sea like metallic dinosaurs will be there for many more years, which means the battle will go on.

"As long as we are relying on oil, which we will be for many more decades, we will have to get it from somewhere," said Eric Smith, a UC Santa Barbara political science professor who studies

how public opinion influences energy policy. “No matter where you get it, there will be some level of damage.”

Small player, lots of noise

In the grand scheme of offshore oil production in the U.S., the Santa Barbara Channel platforms are bit players.

The 23 platforms in the channel have produced about 843 million barrels of oil, compared to the roughly 4,000 structures in the Gulf of Mexico that have produced more than 13 billion barrels, according to the U.S. Minerals Management Service, which regulates the industry. When looking at the undiscovered but technically recoverable offshore oil, the Gulf has 44 billion barrels; Alaska, 26 billion; but the Santa Barbara Channel has only 1.85 billion barrels in reservoirs beneath the sea.

But it is here that the argument over offshore drilling has been loudest — and that’s largely because of the images of the spill on Jan. 28, 1969.

Two years after the first platform was built off Santa Barbara, Union Oil was drilling a new well off what is now Platform A, which sits in 188 feet of water, 5.8 miles off the coast. Union Oil was granted a waiver from the U.S. Geological Survey, which then regulated the industry, to use shorter casings around the well while drilling. The casing keeps the oil and gas from escaping the well.

When workers tried to retrieve a pipe from the 3,500-foot-deep well, the removal caused a pressure differential, and the natural gas started to build up, prompting workers to attempt to cap the well. But that exacerbated the problem, and the building pressure from the gas caused the sea floor to fracture and a gush of oil to rush from the Earth. Had the casing been long enough, the accident would likely have been prevented.

Rupture spread awareness

For the next 12 days, thick crude oil poured from the fractures, sending somewhere from 3.3 million to 4.2 million gallons of oil to the sea, coating birds, beaches and wildlife.

The images of cormorants covered in oil, dead pelicans washed up onto tarry beaches and crashing waves thick with oil seared the psyche of Californians — and the nation.

“The Santa Barbara incident has frankly touched the conscience of the American people,” then-President Richard Nixon said.

Locals staged blockades at the Santa Barbara Pier, where the oil was offloaded, and those people went on to form some of the many environmental groups still fighting drilling today.

The event was a catalyst for a host of environmental laws, agencies and events, including Earth Day, the National Environmental Protection Act, the California Coastal Commission and a litany of new regulations on offshore drilling.

“The spill put a certain intensity behind the argument against oil drilling and without that inspiration for action, I think the tone would be less urgent,” said John Abraham Powell, the president of Get Oil Out! whose grandfather was part of the original blockades. “Nobody enjoys that wake-up call, but if you survive it, which we did, you learned something and you chalk it up to the school of hard knocks.”

Oil in the channel today

Most of the easily recoverable oil is gone from the Santa Barbara Channel. What is left is tucked into crevices and buried in spongy sandstone in the reservoirs more than a mile below the sea

floor.

That's where companies like DCOR come into play. Though the Ventura-based company is tiny compared to oil giants like Exxon or Chevron, it specializes in buying older platforms and extracting the harder-to-get oil the big companies don't bother with. DCOR owns more platforms — 11 — than anyone else in the channel.

"The reason most people haven't heard of us is because we are doing our job," said Robert Garcia, a vice president with the company. Safety for their workers and the environment is priority No. 1, he said.

"I've lived here for 30 years, and the last thing I want is to harm my coastline," Garcia said as he stood on Platform B, where sea lions barking and the whirl of machines created an odd cacophony of nature and industry.

A spill not only means their product is wasted, but there also is the cost of cleanup and the public relations nightmare that follows.

Since the 1969 spill, technology in the industry has come a long way in terms of mapping the ocean floor and enhanced safety and monitoring methods.

Rishi Tyagi, California district operations chief for MMS, said the 1969 spill would not happen again. Beyond regulations that would require longer casing, there are thousands of others that ensure every dial, pump and pipe are working as they should. There is redundancy built into the system and shutoff valves that would stop such a big spill, he said.

Last year, the MMS conducted more than 1,200 unannounced and planned inspections on the 23 platforms.

"You cannot ever rule out anything, but the chances of that happening are a lot less than they

were,” he said.

And indeed, accidents do happen.

In December, a small hole developed in a rusted pipe that sends oil to shore from DCOR’s Platform A, and 1,400 gallons of oil seeped into the ocean.

Tyagi said a preliminary investigation showed it was an oversight that the rust on the pipe wasn’t found to compromise the structural integrity. If negligence is found, a civil or even criminal penalty can be levied.

In the past 10 years, more than \$800,000 in fines have been issued for everything from pipeline leaks to crane accidents.

When accidents happen, oil companies pay for the cleanup, and oversight is done by a specialized team from the California Department of Fish and Game.

‘Spills do happen’

After DCOR’s December spill, activists leaped at the example, saying that is why oil drilling in the channel must stop.

Linda Krop, chief counsel with the Environmental Defense Center, said all the technology in the world can’t stop a human error, which is the leading cause of spills.

“We definitely have heard a lot from the industry during the debates about drilling last year and their message is things have changed and technology is better, and our response is that oil spills and gas leaks still happen,” she said. “No matter how careful you are, there is a huge risk

of a spill and spills do happen.”

Tyagi said as many as 80 percent of accidents are because of human error, though things like poorly designed equipment fall under that category.

Since 1969, platforms in federal waters — from two to 200 miles offshore — have spilled just 852 barrels of oil, according to the MMS.

Smith, the UCSB professor, said statistically, offshore oil drilling is safer than transporting it via tanker.

‘Drill, baby, drill’

How people feel about offshore oil drilling depends largely on how much they are paying for a gallon of gas. As the price goes up, so do the poll numbers of Californians in favor of allowing more drilling off the coast. The majority of Californians still opposes it. Nationally, polls have gone as high as 70 percent in favor of it.

Politicians have changed their minds over time, too.

In Santa Barbara, where being pro-oil was once political suicide, the county Board of Supervisors last year sent a letter to the governor encouraging him to allow more drilling off the coast. During his presidential campaign last year, Sen. John McCain — who was once opposed to new offshore drilling — made a stop in Santa Barbara where he supported the idea. His running mate, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, often chanted, “Drill, baby, drill.”

Last summer, President Bush lifted an executive order that banned new offshore drilling and the House of Representatives in the fall voted to end the ban on new drilling.

Last week, the new U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said the Obama administration was open to new offshore drilling, though he wouldn't say where.

On Thursday, environmentalists tried to broker a deal that would allow one company to drill new wells in state waters with the caveat that they have a fixed end date to remove other platforms. The deal failed. Lt. Gov. John Garamendi, who sits on the State Lands Commission that rejected the deal, said it sent the message that more drilling was welcome and it is not.

New platforms deemed unlikely

DCOR Vice President Jeff Warren said he doesn't think it's likely you'll ever see new platforms off the coast. The political will won't bend so far as to allow more platforms off California, he said. Maybe in the Gulf of Mexico, he said, but in California it's unlikely.

And that's what the environmentalists want to hear.

Greg Helms, program manager with the Ocean Conservancy, said the movement has succeeded in keeping new platforms from being built.

"The community in Santa Barbara and Ventura County has pretty much fought oil to a standstill," he said. Though there is no time frame for when the platforms may go away, for now, no more will be built.

Now, many are looking at the next step.

"We need to evolve," said Rep. Lois Capps, D-Santa Barbara, who has opposed expanded drilling offshore. She said the country needs to look to explore renewable energy and begin to wean itself off oil.

Warren agreed that there is a huge future in renewable sources — but oil will still be a part of the energy supply for a long time.